

Isaiah 7:1-17

Advent 4, Supplement Series A, December 18, 2016

Theme: Stand firm in faith!
I. The LORD controls history
II. Immanuel fulfils history

INJ History is not a subject everyone loves to study. Some find the twists and turns of life in the past fascinating. The lessons learned from history have a way of repeating, so there is a practical side to it. But names and dates and details can also be dry and boring. What interesting and useful things can we learn from Pekah son of Remaliah and Ahaz and the King of Aram? It is a complicated bit of history before us today!

But the takeaway is not complicated. God guided things back then for the good of his people. He does the same today. His plan revolves around the coming of the promised Savior. He wants everyone to trust in him! God's gracious working is perhaps easier to see in history, but he is also active now. He promises an awesome future for those who trust in him.

Do you trust him to keep his promises? Or do the concerns of life seem impossible to sort out? Your worries and fears are right in front of your eyes, while God's Word seems distant and even weak. Do you rely on your own smarts and strength – or will you trust the word of the Lord your God? It is the lesson we learn from this account. Isaiah puts it this way: "If you do not stand firm in faith, you will not stand at all." Stand firm in faith because the LORD controls history, and Immanuel fulfils history.

The reading before us is focused specifically on the things the LORD did to fulfil his promise of a Savior. If you can hear my spelling :-), you will notice that when I say LORD all the letters are capitalized. It is a special name for God used in the Bible to reference the way he steps in to save. The LORD is not watching things from afar, uninvolved in what happens. He intervenes to control all of history for accomplishing his saving plan.

So the details: Ahaz is the King in Jerusalem. He has small influence and he is isolated from help. Two neighboring kings plot to overthrow him and take his place. They have stronger armies, better intelligence, more resources, and a stellar battle plan. The people in Jerusalem tremble in fear because they can see the inevitable defeat.

Should Ahaz surrender to the enemy? Should he prepare the city for a long siege? Mount a sneak attack to take them by surprise? None of the options were favorable. Those two kings, Rezin and Pekah were the kind

of people you don't mess with. It seems they had bold personalities and huge egos – and the power to make life miserable for anyone who stood in their way. The stark reality was that Jerusalem at this point in history was in trouble with no way out. How would God's people survive?

What does your history look like? Anything comparable to the dim situation of Ahaz and Jerusalem? The cancer is marching forward, and there is nothing left to do. The treatments will be just as bad as the disease. The bold personalities of the people in your life bring shouting and anger and a crippling fear of saying the wrong thing. Temptation holds you tightly in its grasp, and you can't seem to escape. Your history has been difficult, and the present is hard with no good options. How will you survive?

One of our problems with history is that it seems immovable. Who can control geopolitical forces? Who can change the status of our health? Who can repair damage done to relationships? Who can turn a dark and foreboding situation into something better? Only One can do those impossible things! The LORD our God controls history. He calls for us to have confidence in him. "If you do not stand firm in faith, you will not stand at all."

God sent the prophet Isaiah to king Ahaz in Jerusalem. His message seemed impossible: "Be careful, and remain calm. Do not be afraid. Do not be faint-hearted because of these two stumps of smoldering torches." "Don't be afraid of the impressive might of these enemies arrayed against us?! Can't you see how bad it is?" The LORD says, "Don't be afraid because I control history. Those two kings you fear are nothing but stumps of burned out torches. They are toothless and sputtering has-beens. They will not conquer Jerusalem. They will not begin a siege or exact tribute from you." Stand firm, for the LORD controls history!

The same LORD tells you to look past the realities your eyeballs see and consider the promises he has spoken. "I am with you always" Jesus says. As our Good Shepherd he says, "No one can snatch you out of my hand." Health issues and relationship problems and political garbage do not have more power than the LORD! Nether does sin. Listen to the LORD comfort you and calm you down. Despite what you may see, the LORD controls history. You need not be overwhelmed. God sent the Savior. Your history is this: your sins are forgiven! You stand firm in faith.

We have the exciting privilege today to witness two baptisms and four confirmations. These new members of our congregation will still be buffeted by the storms of life, and there is no promise their future will be easy. Yet they have found what we also confess: The LORD is our comfort and strength. He has specifically worked history so that we are connected to

his promises. Joined together at St. Luke's, we confess our confidence that he will always do what he says – even if we can't see how it will happen. We rejoice to have these new members join us as we await the heaven that has been promised us, and we look forward to serving alongside them. We stand firm in faith, confident that the LORD controls our history.

Today is also the last Sunday in the Advent Season of the Church Year. Next Sunday already we celebrate the Incarnation, the entering into human flesh of the Second Person of the Triune God. We call it Christmas Day. As we perch on the edge of this historical event, we need to stand firm in faith. History is not just a bunch of random events, but it is the unfolding of God's saving plan. Our account with Ahaz is a memorable moment leading to the central event of time. Stand firm in faith, for Immanuel fulfills history.

Imagine yourself as King Ahaz. His territory was under attack. He did not have the power to withstand the onslaught. He and his people were trembling in fear like "the trees of the forest tremble in the wind." Doom and gloom were the only things he could see! Sometimes we feel that life is stacked up against us like that, don't we? Sin has such a grip on us that we will never get away from it! Pain and worry and all our fears are too great to overcome! Standing firm in faith seems impossible to do.

If you were God you would do something about it! Right? What would you do? Take out the bad guys. Cue the sappy music and make everyone smile. If you were God not only would you make sunny days, the details would make you look good. Ahaz, I think, wanted God not only to help him out, but to enhance his reputation as King. It is surely easier to stand firm when the crowds shout your praises and the people live in safety.

God revealed himself to King Ahaz and promised him something better than winning a war or saving face. Something more important than getting a break or getting ahead. God promised to send the Savior of the world. The LORD said he would intervene in history and stand in the place of sinners to rescue them from condemnation. He would do something more spectacular than defeating an army or winning a battle. He would forgive sin. He would come and rescue his own from death and the Devil. He would save sinners.

Those amazing things are impressive indeed! But you cannot see them with your eyes like you can see the enemy fleeing. You can't hear spiritual deliverance like you can hear the cheer of the people lauding you for being their leader. King Ahaz could have asked for any sign that God would do what he promised and save his people. Anything!

Ahaz wouldn't ask. He acted like he was being humble, but it was a

cover for his unbelief. He didn't want God to talk about forgiveness and heaven. He was more interested in armies and battles and finances and strategies and what people thought about him. Do we get distracted like Ahaz did? "No, God, don't bother me with all that talk about grace. I want to see better health, better numbers, better relationships. Only then will I be happy!" Standing firm in faith, however, is not about what we see, but it relies on what God says.

The LORD who controls history stepped into history. The sign he promised Ahaz and all of us is this: "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and call his name Immanuel." Immanuel means "God with us." It is impossible for a virgin to conceive. It is impossible for God to take on flesh to be with us. It is impossible for our guilt to be wiped away. It is impossible for sinners like us to have heaven. But God promised to do the impossible. Immanuel is the fulfillment of history, when God entered human flesh to save sinners. Immanuel is the whole point of time, if you want to think about it that way. We have time – each minute, hour, day and year – to hear and learn about Immanuel. God is with us! At the end of time, Immanuel will give us an eternity of glory. The words and promises of God are a solid foundation on which to stand even when it seems impossible! "Stand firm in faith, or you will not stand at all!"

Ahaz wasn't interested in things he couldn't see. What good is a promise when those soldiers are ready to break down the doors? God kept his promise. Jerusalem was not captured by Pekah and Rezin. The Assyrian armies obliterated their kingdoms in just a few years. Ahaz was never happy though. His unbelief kept him from rejoicing in what the LORD had done.

Worse days happened in the nation, as you walk through history. Much time passed, and names and dates were mostly forgotten. But then – you know what happened – the virgin gave birth to a son, and they called him Immanuel. He is Christ, the Lord. God did the impossible, fulfilling history by sending his Son. We stand in faith, amazed at the undeserved love God showed us. Filled with joy at the forgiveness proclaimed to us. We may not see miraculous events unfold before our eyes, but we stand firm in faith. Immanuel has fulfilled history and made our future certain.

We have a week until we observe Christmas. Plenty of historical details will stand in the way of you and Immanuel. Fears and worries. Chores and appointments. Those things are so real and pressing! Yet each moment finds meaning in Immanuel. God is with us. He has rescued you from sin's condemnation. He is the fulfillment of all history. Prepare to rejoice in your Savior's birth. Be ready for his return to take you to heaven. You stand firm in faith, and you will stand with him forever! SDG Amen.